

July 9, 2007

B-19J

Forest Supervisor Anne Archie
c/o Christine Brunner
Eagle River-Florence Ranger District
Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest
1247 East Wall Street
Eagle River, Wisconsin 54521

Re: Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Fishel Vegetation and Transportation Management Project on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (NF), Eagle River-Florence Ranger District, Forest and Vilas Counties, Wisconsin - EIS No. 20070200

Dear Ms. Brunner:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Fishel Vegetation and Transportation Management Project on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest (Forest). Our review is pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act, the Council on Environmental Quality regulations, and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act.

In 2004, the Forest adopted a new Forest Plan, which provides general guidance regarding the management of National Forest lands. The Forest Plan divides the Forest into different Management Areas (MAs), each having particular objectives and a desired future condition (DFC). The purpose of the proposed project is to initiate actions that would implement the Forest Plan and move forest resources toward the DFC for the MAs located in the Fishel analysis area. U.S. EPA compliments the USFS on its efforts to improve structural and species diversity in northern hardwood interior block habitat as well as improve forest composition and age class distribution of aspen and pine.

The draft EIS documents the analysis of four alternatives and selection of Alternative 2 as the Preferred Alternative. The alternatives differ by the harvest acreage and type, mileage of roads to be constructed or reconstructed, and snag creation. The alternative proposed during scoping was modified based on additional review of the transportation needs related to the proposed actions. The USFS presents its Preferred Alternative as best addressing the purpose and need in the project area.

Based on our review, we have assigned a rating of **"EC-2" (Environmental Concerns – Insufficient Information)** to this draft EIS. We recommend the final EIS include additional detail for the items discussed below.

Snag Creation

We look to the final EIS to explain why the Preferred Alternative, Alternative 2, would be the best choice to provide an adequate amount of suitable habitat for the suite of species which utilize snags and coarse woody debris (CWD), particularly the American marten. For example, gaps in hardwood stands will be created under both Alternatives 2 and 3, but Alternative 3 differs by proposing to girdle trees to create gaps through snag creation where snags are lacking; under Alternative 2, existing snags would be retained, but no additional snags would be created. Additionally, Alternative 3 proposes to defer from treatment hardwood stands that had been treated within the previous 20 years; deferring treatment would provide additional time for snag and CWD development.

The draft EIS states that the intent of creating gaps by girdling trees is to supplement the amount of existing standing dead snags, as well as provide down woody material when the girdled trees fall. Some of the hardwood stands, particularly the younger stands, lack quantities of large snags and large down woody debris as a result of earlier losses from frequent treatment entries, as well as the removal of large trees occurring prior to the proclamation of the NF. More snags and down woody material would provide additional foraging habitat for goshawks over the long term.

We pose this issue with the understanding that the 2004 Forest Plan provides standards and guidelines designed to ensure sufficient snags and CWD remain following management activities. We, therefore, understand that the Preferred Alternative, as presented in the draft EIS, would provide sufficient amounts of habitat for the suite of species which utilize snags and CWD as established in the Forest Plan; we are requesting clarification in the final EIS explaining why Alternative 2 would be the better of the two management options.

Retain Species Health and Vigor

The Preferred Alternative proposes commercial thinning to reduce stand densities on 531 acres. Thinning would reduce competition for water, nutrients, and sunlight; improve stand vigor and diameter growth; and enhance understory growth. Alternative 5 proposes the same thinning treatments as the Preferred Alternative, and includes an additional 32 acres of aspen that would be thinned to promote understory hardwood development and reducing overall fragmentation of this habitat.

We look to the final EIS to clarify that the Preferred Alternative would be the best selection to improve species health, enhance understory growth, and reduce overall habitat fragmentation, in light of additional thinning proposed under Alternative 5.

Northern Goshawk

The draft EIS states that a goshawk nest protection area consisting of two zones will be defined as a 68-acre area. This nest protection area is the same as the protection zones for goshawk established in the Forest Plan. The Preferred Alternative proposes individual tree selection or individual tree selection with gaps on two of the four goshawk territories within Zone 2; however, these treatment types are not expected to reduce the canopy closure below 80 percent, which would make the habitat unsuitable for goshawk.

Alternative 3 proposes a 124-acre buffer around all goshawk nest territories, with no treatment proposed within the buffer. We look to the final EIS to clarify why Alternative 3 proposes a larger buffer area than what was established in the Forest Plan.

In summary, we request clarification that selection of the Preferred Alternative is the best management option for 1) providing snags and CWD, 2) promoting species health, and 3) treatment within goshawk nest territories or whether a revised hybrid Preferred Alternative would best support management objectives.

Please send one copy of the final EIS to this office once it becomes available. We look forward to discussing our comments with USFS personnel; please do not hesitate to contact me or Kathleen Kowal of my staff at (312) 353-5206.

Sincerely,

/s/

Kenneth A. Westlake
Supervisor for NEPA Implementation
Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance

cc: Jim McDonald, Regional Environmental Coordinator
Enclosure – Summary of Rating Definitions